



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Baptism of the Lord-Year C-January 13th 2019

***Readings: Isaiah 40: 1-5, 9-11, Psalm 103, Titus 2: 11-14, 3: 4-7,
Luke 3: 15-16, 21-22***

PURGATORY

‘He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with FIRE.’

What is this fire of Christ to which we look forward?

By virtue of our age and demographic we are all too familiar with funerals. Most of the modern rites of passage have little to do with the Christian understanding of the reality of death or the consequential events in the life of the soul. The non-believers obsequies at the Crem. usually assume, even with most agnostic celebrant, an untroubled futurity for the deceased in pleasant surroundings not unlike the heaven they never believed in and miraculously reunited with a selection of equally atheistic friends, partners, lovers who have predeceased them. (I recently attended one of these efforts where the representative of the Secular Society assured us that ‘our dear Arthur was now reunited with his dear Jenny’ – pause for a meaningful upward glance. As he greeted me at the door I simply said, ‘Where? Where are they reunited?’ – The honest thing for an atheist to say is, ‘It’s over. Goodnight Vienna. Arthur is now composting nicely. There is no future for this sack of molecules, the biology has unravelled, the emotion you are feeling is just an electro-chemical twitch. Get over it. You are next.’ Instead we are treated to

cartloads of nausea inducing sentimentality and, in place of the 'implausible' Christian mythos, we find younger people telling their children that 'Grandad is now a star in the sky'.

Even in Christian circles we are increasingly treated to 'a celebration of the life'. Pleasant though this maybe it cannot take the place of a funeral and, for Catholics, the centrality of the Requiem Mass. It usually assumes that the deceased has romped straight into heaven to a fanfare of trumpets. Job done. This is, of course, equally uncatholic teaching.

The Requiem Mass pays direct attention to the needs of the soul – forgiveness, reconciliation, healing. In it we enjoy the accompaniment of the prayers of the faithful on earth and the prayers of the saints, the Church triumphant in Heaven. We are not alone in this mystery of death. Above all, we plead the sacrifice of the One who has defeated death and raised up our fallen humanity to its eternal destiny. Catholics are not individualists but part of the glorious Family of Faith on earth, in Heaven and in the Purification. We pray for one another wherever we are. For our own self-interest we need to teach our children this so that they pray for our souls often when we shuffle off this mortal coil.

Catholics know that we are creatures of God, Man made in His image. We know that, by incorporation into Christ in our Baptism, we become His children. We know also that, for most of us, try as we might, we do not die perfect, all holy, utterly sanctified. Because we have a religion that is profoundly about our relationship with God, the journey of the soul is also relational. God is not some celestial Sooty who sprinkles us with 'OOFLE DUST' miraculously transforming us into perfect beings. That sanctification is a work of Divine love and mercy. The process of that purification we call Purgatory.

The word itself comes from the Greek word for 'fire'. Fire, as we know, can have many uses. It burns rubbish. It gives light. It is a source of energy. It is warmth. It refines the very gold on our fingers that symbolises unending love and commitment. The fire of God's love is the

opposite of the fires of Hell. One of the great poetic recognitions of this comes in T.S.Eliot's poem, 'Little Gidding' – of the action of God and the choice of the soul, he writes:

The dove descending breaks the air With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare The one discharge from sin and
error.

The only hope, or else despair Lies in the choice of pyre of pyre-
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

According to Eliot and Holy Scripture we are saved from the fires of Hell by the purifying transforming fire of God's love.

We choose which fire – Satan's destruction or God's redemptive mercy.

Holy Scripture refers to this process most directly in three passages.

In II Maccabees 12 v 39f we see the sinful slain warriors of the faith benefitting from the intercession of the living, sin offering making atonement for them and them not being precluded from Heaven. (Luther hated this passage).

In I Corinthians 3 v12-15, St. Paul talks about our works as a building which will be tested by fire. The wood, hay, thatch will be destroyed.

Only that gold which is not destroyed will remain. Even if all your work is consumed, Paul assures us, true you will suffer loss but you will still be saved. The word for fire here is the root of the word for Purgatory – the place of purification.

In I Peter 4 v 12, the faithful are told that they will endure the trial of fire so they can share in the sufferings of Christ. And in II Peter 3 v7f our first Pope tells us that the PUR, the fire, will disclose the truth about all creation as the very elements melt and Man is stripped down to his ultimate reality.

As Catholics we look forward to Purgatory. It means that if we have our hands on the very lowest rung of the ladder we are heaven bound and,

however painful our journey is, as the encrustations of our sinfulness are purged away and our persons made ready for the Eternal Presence, it is a journey of supreme hope. Purgatory is not a 'mini Hell' but a place where the faithful are licked into the shape we were always meant to be by the fire of God's love.

St. John Paul II wrote: 'If the soul has to undergo purification for the remains of sin in Purgatory, it is nonetheless full of light, of certitude, of joy, because it is sure that it belongs to God forever'.

The unholy cannot dwell in the Presence of the All Holy. By God's gracious mercy and the power of His purifying love, He makes us fit to dwell forever with Him. Asked for a simple summary of the doctrine of Purgatory, an old Glaswegian priest friend of mine summed it up thus: 'Why go to Heaven as you are.....and spoil it!'